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Way Cleared to Move Cultists' Bodies

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REP. THOMAS B. EVANS JR.
...outlines body transfer plan

By Ward Sinclair
Washington Post Staff Writer

The way was cleared yesterday for the transfer of 586 unclaimed bodies of Peoples Temple murder-suicide victims from Delaware to California, according to Rep. Thomas B. Evans Jr. (R-Del.).

Evans said a pledge of cooperation by the State Department will now allow an interfaith religious group in San Francisco to speed up the body transfer process.

Under the plan, the Emergency Relief Committee, using money obtained in the dissolution of Peoples Temple assets—estimated to be at least $12 million—will oversee the transportation effort.

The bodies, embalmed and placed in plastic bags inside coffins, have been at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware since they were flown from the temple's jungle settlement in Guyana, where more than 900 died in a murder-suicide last November.

Since last month Evans had been pressing the State Department to assist in transferring the bodies—272 of which remain unidentified—from Dover AFB to California.

"They made a mistake in taking the bodies to Delaware in the first place," Evans said yesterday. "I felt the State Department should have made the decision some time ago to transport the bodies to California."

The congressman said that "virtually all" of his Delaware constituents feel the state should not bear the responsibility of disposing of the bodies. He added that he intends to introduce legislation requiring transfer of the bodies if the new agreement breaks down.

Evans said, however, that the agreement, disclosed to him during a meeting with Barbara Watson, assistant secretary of state for consular affairs, will allow the relief committee to move ahead with transfer plans.

The committee is obtaining bids from private carriers to move the bodies, Evans said, but no decision has been made on when the move will occur or where the bodies will be taken in California.

He also said that truck lines, railroads and air carriers are being considered as contractors, but that in any case the transfer cost will likely be less than the estimate of $140,000 if done by the Defense Department.

"We are working with the Emergency Relief Committee in securing bids from the private sector," Evans said. "It is apparent to me that the private sector can do it for less."

The committee is expected to deliver its plan for movement and disposal of the unclaimed bodies by Feb. 23, the deadline set by a California court.

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